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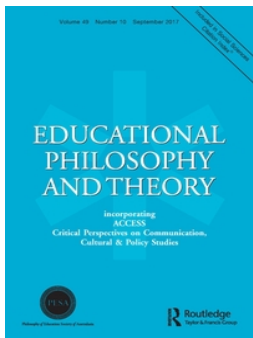
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Chris Hanley

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An exploration of educative *praxis*: Reflections on Marx's concept *praxis*, informed by the Lacanian concepts *act* and *event*

Chris Hanley

Faculty of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, Crewe, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores an aspect of Karl Marx's concept, *praxis*. *Praxis* is meaningful work, through which we fulfil ourselves by fulfilling others. The discussion draws on the author's work with postgraduate student teachers, where both students and author were researching their own practice. Reflecting Marx's conception of *praxis* as subjective fulfilment in the objective world, this activity was intended to trouble and complicate the categories 'subjective' and 'objective', whilst enabling students to become both more autonomous and other-oriented. The intention behind this article is to develop the theoretical vocabulary of *praxis* available to educational researchers and practitioners. Some ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis are introduced, followed by extensive discussion of Slavoj Žižek's concepts, 'act' and 'event'. The key argument is that in a nascent educative *praxis*, 'subjective' and 'objective' perspectives can be understood not as fixed points of reference, but as dual orientations on a flow of signification. These ideas are developed alongside detailed examination of two university-based research sessions with student teachers. With reference to session activities, a rationale is provided for an emerging educative *praxis*, in which students explore creative tensions between 'subjective' and 'objective' perspectives on school-based practice.

KEYWORDS

Educative *praxis*; Marx; psychoanalysis; acts; events

Introduction

This article explores Karl Marx's notion of *praxis* from the perspective of a university tutor, involved with the development of secondary school teachers at an English university. Student teachers and their tutor were engaging in a process of practitioner research, with the intention of developing a deeper understanding of the students' practice as beginner teachers. The tutor directed students' attention towards the knowledge they took to be 'theirs', relative to knowledge they saw as external to themselves. Thus, students were encouraged to interrogate connections between 'subjective' and 'objective' worlds, to develop a more nuanced understanding of how they shape and influence one another.

In theorising this activity, the tutor was grappling with Marx's conception of *praxis*. In this conception, human life has been artificially separated into 'subjective' and 'objective' domains, whereas, as Marx puts it, 'Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear...as the direct efflux of their material behaviour' (Marx, 1978, p. 154). We think in particular ways because of how we live; thinking will not change until we change the way we live (see also 1978, p. 145). One of the key theoretical commitments in this article is that educative practice can help bring about such transformation.

As a worker in the knowledge economy, the market decides how much money or credit I get for my work. Yet I am also suggesting that an educator's work should be regarded as having *educative* value, where the work is valuable in its own right and re-affirming of the life of the worker. In Marx's terminology, educative work regarded as *praxis*. This is challenging given that student teachers are conventionally seen as neoliberal 'subjects' in pursuit of accreditation bearing 'objects' (Pais, 2013). A caricature of teacher education might portray student learning as merely ticking off a list of competencies prior to accreditation. The intention with this research was to encourage students to challenge this view of themselves. The research employs a rather unconventional methodology, reflecting innovations in the field of education that problematise the boundaries between 'subjectively' and 'objectively' located experience (e.g. Adams, Kueh, Newman-Storen, & Ryan, 2015; Caldwell, Osborne, Mewburn, & Nottingham, 2015). Two university sessions designed for this purpose are outlined later in this article, illustrating how the tutor translated an understanding of *praxis* into activities supportive of practitioner research.

One of the purposes of this paper is to extend the theoretical vocabulary available to educationists working with Marx, the theory of *praxis* in particular. Given that educative practice involves language and thinking and problems with these, I am using psychoanalytic theory to supplement Marx's ideas. Lacan relocated Freud's unconscious in the workings of language, so that there is a dislocation between the linguistic effects we want to make and those actually produced (Lacan, 1977, pp. 23–28). For example, when talking with others, I may find myself saying things and conveying meanings I did not intend. According to my reading of Lacan, language is neither entirely pliable to the intentions of its individual users, nor wholly independent of language users, but persistently on the move between the two. To paraphrase Lacan's explanation in *My Teaching*, the subject both produces and is produced by discourse (Lacan, 2008, p. 36). Building on these ideas, the article utilises Žižek's concepts *act* and *event* towards a theorisation of educative *praxis*. It is argued that educators can work with creative and critical engagement in between 'subjective' and 'objective' spaces.

In the following sections, *praxis* means 'fulfilling work'; 'subjective' means seen from the point of view of self; 'objective' means seen from the viewpoint of the outside; 'material' means relating to the necessities of life; 'orientation' means an unfixed position, *act* means a radically autonomous action, an *event* is a radically new occurrence, *universality* relates to all humans, *abstraction* relates to market exchange. 'Educative' and 'educational' are essentially interchangeable.

Thinking about *praxis* in education

Recent scholarship concerned with subject pedagogic knowledge, or 'teacher knowledge', has developed a very influential line of inquiry (e.g. Eraut, 1994; Leach & Moon, 1999; Winch, Oancea, & Orchard, 2015.) Here, the 'subject' of the knowledge, the practitioner, is also the 'object' of inquiry. The practitioner is portrayed as becoming more knowledgeable about 'their' practice, by making increasingly astute connections between 'their' particular needs as a learner and externally located challenges.

However, with teacher education, experience suggests there is limited value in making too clean a distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' forms of knowledge. To illustrate this point, I will now outline a relatively low-key activity I do with student teachers. The purpose of this example is to illustrate how thinking more flexibly about 'subjective' and 'objective' perspectives, can enhance a student's capacity to reflect on their own learning. The course referred to is one-year postgraduate training course for secondary teachers of English.

At the beginning of the course after few weeks in university, students begin their teaching practice in school. I invite students to make space in lessons to scribble down notes and reflections, particularly if the lesson has begun shakily. The immediate purpose is for students to capture what they are thinking and feeling at the time. The longer term intention is for students to reflect on this data with the benefit of critical distance, to explore how their own ideas, expectations and emotions were shaping up the educative encounter. For example, a student might believe that following some focussed discussion in class, pupils will inevitably make certain inferences about what they have been discussing. However, the student finds that the pupils cannot make this leap. The student's subsequent reflections on this episode,

would help them to discern how their beliefs about certain 'objective' properties of knowledge (whereby one state of inferential knowledge leads inevitably to another), influenced the situation in ways they did not intend and were not 'subjectively' aware. The challenge for the student would then be to find ways of re-articulating these 'objective' properties as aspects of an enriched 'subjective' understanding, with a view to doing things differently in future. Thus, viewed as fluid, interconnecting orientations on learning, 'subjective' and 'objective' perspectives would seem to give valuable explanatory purchase. Viewed as fixed vantage points, they have little value in situations such as this.

These issues may seem far removed from Marx's life and concerns. Yet I wish to argue that Marx's conception of *praxis*, or fulfilling human work, raises questions of central importance for educators and education. In the example above, the student teacher moves between 'subjective' and 'objective' perspectives on their practice. Expressed schematically, the question raised by Marx is, 'on what basis can "subjective" and "objective" perspectives be said to belong together?'. That is, what is the common terrain, the unifying ground that allows us to switch between perspectives as dual aspects of a single reality? Moreover, how can this reality be said to relate to the world of work?

Universality vs. abstraction

Reading Marx encourages two lines of response. With the first, the common ground between the 'subjective' and 'objective' is *universality*, and relates to the material needs common to all humans. The second is *abstraction*, pertaining to the form of equivalence between different kinds of labour, through which we participate in the market economy. We can begin to consider these ideas in reference to student teachers, by arguing that they may be motivated by two competing sets of beliefs about the ultimate purpose of becoming a teacher. With the first, they are driven by a desire for greater knowledge about how humans learn, about the benefits of learning for human society, the value of learning compared to other kinds of human good. In distinction, with the second set of beliefs, they are concerned with acquiring knowledge that can be exchanged for other forms of recognition, such as accreditation to become a teacher. Thus, in each case, the translation of 'subjective' priorities into inter-subjective, 'objective' reality is imagined to take place very differently.

It seems that student teachers experience *universal* and *abstract* perspectives not in a neat dichotomy, but a complex and sometimes troubling contradiction. It may be that student teachers juggle personal and professional commitments that are not easy to reconcile (e.g. a desire to critique ones working environment, set against the need to guarantee accreditation. See Hanley & Brown, 2016a). As Judith Butler suggests in her work on *universality*, tidy conceptualisations are not replicated in lived experience (Butler, Laclau, & Žižek, 2000, pp. 28, 29). A student may attempt to move beyond such entanglements but giving up old knowledge comes with an element of risk. It is perhaps safer to stick with what we have always known, as is revealed in Freud's concept of the 'transference-love', wherein 'infantile screen memories return anytime one tries to learn, judge the worth of knowledge, and insist one already knows' (Britzman, 2011, p. 74). In the account of postgraduate university sessions given later in this article, student teachers are depicted as grappling with their own propensity to create or resist new forms of knowledge in a developmental process of educative *praxis*. First, further utilising concepts in the work of Marx, the notions *universality* and *abstraction* are used to frame and develop a nascent conception of educative *praxis*.

Marx, Hegel and praxis

It will be useful to trace some of the ideas being employed, back to their roots in Marx's texts. As been widely noted (Avineri, 1968; Bernstein, 1971; Hill, 2009; Kitching, 1988), Marx's work was motivated by a desire to critique that of Hegel, though Marx saw himself as recalibrating rather than overthrowing the Hegelian system. From Hegel, Marx retained the idea that history is essentially dialectical, with the twin poles of subject and object comprising inverse sides of a higher reality. Whereas with Hegel the

higher reality is *geist*, or spirit, fulfilling itself in the movement of history, for Marx the higher reality is humankind, specifically in their material and productive existence (Marx, 1978, p. 301).

Marx's writings aimed at exposing how these material necessities locked humans in relations of mutual competition and hostility (1978, p. 185). Meanwhile, he developed alternative conceptualisations of the basis on which human beings could be said to belong together. These ideas rested on an assumption that all classes of human life were supported by the productive activity of just one group, the proletariat, whose participation in human productivity was restricted to alienated labour. Thus, Marx developed a conception of non-alienated labour or *praxis*. In one notable passage, Marx presents a vision of fulfilling work, through which the worker objectifies their own creative powers whilst affirming and extending social bonds of mutuality.

Suppose we had produced things as human beings: in his production each of us would have *twice affirmed* himself and the other. (1) In my *production* I would have objectified my *individuality* and its *particularity*, and in the course of the activity I would have enjoyed an individual life; in viewing the object I would have experienced the individual joy of knowing my personality as an *objective, sensuously perceptible*, and indubitable power. (2) In your satisfaction and your use of my product I would have had the *direct* and conscious satisfaction that my work satisfied a *human* need, that it objectified *human* nature, and that it created an object appropriate to the need of another *human* being. (3) I would have been the *mediator* between you and the species and you would have experienced me as a redintegration [*sic*] of your own nature and a necessary part of your self; I would have been affirmed in your thought as well as your love. (4) In my individual life I would have directly created your life; in my individual activity I would have immediately *confirmed* and *realized* my true human and social nature. (Marx, 1967, p. 281)

Experience suggests young teachers enter the profession in search of precisely this kind of work. That is to say, teachers often conceive of their interactions with students as more than pedagogically motivated exchanges resulting in particular forms of instrumentally useful knowledge. Rather, students teachers (and others, of course) are typically concerned with the human 'material' underlying institutionally sanctioned forms of educative engagement (see Hanley & Brown, 2016a). These points seem especially relevant in the exploration of educative *praxis*, being presented in this article. Perhaps educational practice can itself be viewed as a means of mediating between ideas of 'subject' and 'object' or as Marx puts it here, 'human' and 'species'. That is to say, we can view education as part of the basic materiality of life, through engaging in which individuals fulfil themselves in relation to one another.

In the above passage, Marx frames this movement from 'subjective' to 'objective' as a positive transition from the personal to the *universal* sphere (see also Marx, 1978, pp. 191, 192). That is, through my work I can participate in the material existence of all humans. However, in his great work *Capital*, Marx considers another angle, wherein through a valuation of my labour I am shifted from the domain of *universality* to the realm of *abstraction*. Here, my work has value in relation to an abstract conception of work, or 'labour in general' (Marx, 1976, p. 135). Hence, my work appears valuable only in respect of similar work of equal value and, as Marx puts it, in explaining his famous thesis on the fetishism of commodities, there is a 'definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things' (1976, p. 165). My labour is transformed into a commodity, an object of exchange rather than innate value. Educational literature abounds with examples of professional knowledge subordinated to a common standard (e.g. Gerrard & Farrell, 2014; Locke, 2015). For Marx it is through the movement of such abstractions, false substitutes for real (*universal*) material conditions, that workers fall prey to the ideology of dominant groups.

Educative *praxis*, thinking and criticality

The last section outlined two opposed vocabularies, for conceptualising how the work of a 'subject' connects with the 'objective' world. In the first vocabulary, the individual participates through work in the productive existence of the species; in the second, their work is regarded merely as a commodity to be bought and sold. Many educationalists have highlighted the difficulty of knowing for certain which category of work 'education' falls under (e.g. Hanley, 2015). In a knowledge economy, perhaps it is only natural that the value of *thinking* should be equated with its exchangeable value in the currency of accreditation or 'performance'. A conception of *praxis* relevant for the knowledge economy,

would therefore be taking into account how thinking can lay claim to *universality*, in referring itself to the material existence of all humans. Though Marx did not formulate such a universal theory of cognition (Bernstein, 1971), Leszek Kolakowski developed a Marxian epistemology of the thinking subject, where thinking is presented as the process by which the individual marks self *as self*, as distinct from the surrounding world of objects.

Man as a cognitive being is only part of man as a whole ... this part is constantly involved in a process of progressive autonomization, nevertheless it cannot be understood otherwise than as a function of a continuing dialogue between human needs and their objects. (Kolakowski, 1968, p. 66)

Thus by marking self *as self*, the thinking subject redefines their relationship with the outside world. Kolakowski's depiction of the inside/outside of thinking is distinct from the Althusserian position in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, where the human subject is little more than a prop for a subjectively located ideological demand (2001, p. 116). The Althusserian denial of human nature has drawn criticism from scholars sympathetic to Marxism (e.g. Geras, 1983). Ian Parker (2007) challenges Althusser's use of Lacan's mirror stage, by pointing out that a self-enclosed human subject cannot be available for ideological 'interpellation' in the simplistic way Althusser proposes. In contrast with Althusser's moment of total identification or 'interpellation', Kolakowski represents human nature as in contact with essential objects that resist its advances, requiring the human being to critically re-imagine what they really know and who they are.

Newly claimed territory of *self* may only be mine for the time being, until the outside world ('material actuality' in Marx's language), finds a way of claiming it back. Thus, as an educator, I may regard myself as 'someone who knows', until I meet with some of the harsher classroom realities. Thereafter, I may be able to work with a more critically informed conception of who I am and what I really know, and a better appreciation of why learners resist educational authorities (see also Freire, 2000). This process of updating the image oneself in the face of external resistance is reminiscent of Lacan's dictum, 'the intervention of the signifier makes the Other emerge as a field' (Lacan, 2007, p. 15). The 'Other' refers to the external world of meanings in which 'I', the signifier, intervene, thereby defining myself and the 'Other' in relation to one another. Yet the meaning of the signifier is not fixed, it continues to be redefined in its relations with the world in an endless deferral of final meaning.

Often beginner teachers have a limited sense of how pre-existing beliefs and ideas shape their pedagogical perspectives. In my work with student teachers, initially they are tasked with 'noticing' (Mason, 2002) how their activity is motivated without their full awareness. Then students explore where these motivations might be coming from (e.g. their own learning histories, backgrounds, attitudes, etc.). Reflecting Kolakowski's theory of cognition, students in my sessions are asked to assert particular sets of ideas as *theirs*, whilst continually re-appraising whether ideas *are* actually theirs or simply unexamined mental habits. A simplistic opposition between 'subjective' and 'objective' knowledge is thereby called into question. Further, they are continually challenged to scrutinise the needs of learners (*universality*), set against the requirements of accreditation (*abstraction*). Later on I give a fuller account of university sessions in which this work was done, for colleagues interested in experimenting with similar approaches.

In the next section, the theorisation of educative *praxis* is further developed. Two accounts of the author's work with student teachers, are presented alongside some Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (as interpreted by Slavoj Žižek).

Introducing *act* and *events*

This section begins with an extended quotation from Lacan's *My Teaching* (2008), wherein Lacan alludes to the relationship between a user of language and her presence, or non-presence, within the language used. This passage begins with relatively straightforward observations about the grammatical subject of a sentence, moving somewhat cryptically onto subjectivity situated outside the sentence, or obscured from the grammatical construction altogether:

There is the subject of the utterance [énoncé]. That subject is quite easy to identify. *I* means the person who is actually speaking at the moment I say *I*. But the subject is not always the subject of the utterance, because not all utterances contain *I*. Even when there is no *I*—even when you say, ‘It’s raining’, there is a subject of the enunciation [énonciation], and there is a subject even when it can no longer be grasped in a sentence.

All this allows us to represent a lot of things. The subject that concerns us here, the subject not insofar as it produces discourse but insofar as it is produced [fait], cornered even [fait comme un rat], by discourse, is the subject of the enunciation. (p. 36)

In the shorter paragraph Lacan seems to be implying that customarily, subjectivity is located *behind* intentional acts of speaking or writing, i.e. acts of creation or authorship. But this approach is only partial or superficial (*‘not insofar as it produces discourse’*). Lacan seems to be saying that subjectivity is *itself* produced in a prior gesture of expression or articulation (énoncé/énonciation). Thus, it seems the idea one has of oneself as a user of discourse, at least some of time, depends upon a more fundamental conception of discursive intentionality. As Lacan suggests in this passage, we might be surprised, even feel ‘cornered’, when certain discursive intentions are identified as ‘ours’. For example, I find it interesting to observe seminar discussions, particularly where students are involved in debate or disputation. Sometimes a student says something to which another student takes exception. The first student might find that their initial point gets lost in the ensuing exchanges, with the second student responding to an image or impression of what they think the first student intended to say, rather than what was meant. The first student may feel ‘cornered’, trapped by an image of what they supposedly think. The disputed image may seem to gather its own (‘objective’) momentum that, from their limited ‘subjective’ position, the first student may struggle to counteract.

Bearing in mind Marx’s conception of *praxis* as work in which we fulfil ourselves through fulfilling others, such seminar debates have interesting implications for a notion of educative *praxis*, being developed in this article. Such debates reveal that our utterances do not in any straightforward way, convey the intentions we may have for them. They are re-shaped and re-directed by the intentions of others, and in responding to these changes we may begin to adjust the image we have of ourselves, to re-appraise who we think we are. In the Lacanian perspective being presented here, identity is not fixed but subject to endless re-iterations, as we update ideas about ourselves from a position that itself is not permanently fixed. As Lacan puts it in another famous dictum, ‘the signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier’ (2008, p. 36). In the above debate, the second student is not responding to the first student as such, but to a place-holder in discourse, a ‘signifier’ or image of the first student’s meaning, influenced by their own (the second student’s) desires and intentions. My general point here picks up, again, on the Marxian theory of cognition developed by Kolakowski, above. Our work as educators requires us to define our thinking as clearly as possible in language. To assert certain thinking as *ours*. And yet, with that very gesture of assertion (‘enunciation’), we open ourselves to the workings of discourse, where our thinking is continually answerable to the needs of others.

Working with a notion of educative *praxis* might therefore encourage us to see thinking as an interplay of *both* ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ perspectives. This interplay is now theorised, influenced by Žižek’s conceptions of *acts* and *events*, though as the students were English graduates, an alternative approach could have been to emphasise the psychoanalytic dimension of reading and responding to literature (Alcorn & Bracher, 1985). Such an approach might emphasise individual responses to occupancy of different discursive positions in the activity of reading, thinking or talking (Bracher, Alcorn, Corthell, & Messardier-Kennedy, 1994). In the perspective being adopted here, the notion of an *act* highlights the perspective of the subject, working purposively on an externally configured world. Meanwhile, the notion *event* emphasises the perspective of the outside or ‘objective’ world, influencing the ‘internal’ world of the subject or learner.

The two university sessions described next, were run for postgraduate student teachers of secondary English. The course included a practitioner research dimension, in which students were persistently revising a developmental story about learning to be a teacher. The particular circumstances of the project, including student and tutor data, are outlined elsewhere (Hanley & Brown, 2016a, 2016b). Throughout the one-year course, students gathered data capturing various dimensions of

their school-based practice (a reflection after a lesson, a newspaper snippet, reflections on student interactions, a recollected conversation with a mentor, etc.). These formed the basis of subsequent analytical work at university.

University session one: The 'subjective' perspective

In a university session, students formed small groups and shared short extracts of data (i.e. capturing different aspects of their school-based activity). Students were asked to retain the original form of words when sharing data, and not to offer paraphrase, elucidatory comment, or any further addition to the original wording. When responding to the others' data, students first wrote down their thoughts without discussion taking place. Students then read out their responses, again without dialogue taking place. These activities had previously been trialled by the tutors, who noted the effects of group psychological processes (Bibby, 2011), whereby students became overly concerned with the reactions of peers and lost sight of the original data. Students were asked to pay close attention to how the group dynamic shaped the subsequent discussion, for example, by generating consensus around particular interpretations of the data and downplaying others. The purpose of this activity was to encourage students to recognise in themselves the desire to participate in socially sanctioned responses to the complexities of practice. In a Freudian register, students were nudged towards perceiving the workings of transference, by recognising how the desire for love and knowledge acts as defence against what is new and unproven (Britzman, 2011, p. 71). We intended to relieve the data (as far as possible) from the dragging effects of peer-group interaction and let it assert itself 'objectively', in ways that might unsettle or reconfigure current modes of understanding.

In theorising the nature of such liberated use of language, Žižek notes

A truly autonomous symbolic act or intervention never occurs as the result of strategic calculation, as I go through all possible reasons and then choose the most appropriate course of action. An act is autonomous not when it applies a pre-existing norm but when it creates a norm in the very act of applying it. Take the act of falling in love: I don't fall in love when I meet a woman who meets my pre-established criteria; if it's true love, then I don't love the woman for her smile, eyes, legs, etc.—I love her smile, eyes, etc. because they are hers. So it is not that I act and make choices without reasons, rather that I freely choose which set of reasons will determine me. (Žižek, 2014, p. 21)

In the session outlined here, students were being encouraged to see themselves as capable of such autonomous *acts*. It was important for students to try to let the data speak for itself, to feel challenged into coming up with an innovative response. Equally significant was for students to notice the routines of thinking with which they were tackling the data, and to try to analyse these stock responses. The intention was for students to become more self-determining in the way that they were dealing with the data and each other, whilst being alert to an image or idea of the data being presented by others, and to allow for these responses in their own thinking. Thus, the students were aiming to become 'beings for themselves' as well as for others (Freire, 2000, p. 74). As is suggested by Žižek in this passage, for the activity to be significant, there was a sense in which students had first to decide to treat it *as* significant, rather than waiting for the significance to appear. As Žižek says in a related passage, there is always something undecidable, a 'moment of contingency' in every manifestation of meaning (Žižek, 2014, p. 21). That is, for a passage of meaning to be taken *as meaningful*, requires a simultaneous assertion that the passage *is* meaningful, with the assertion (or 'enunciation') itself acting as guarantor. The assertion can be understood as the locus of an *act*, in the Lacanian sense under consideration. Through discursive *acts*, we assert or announce new ground where alternative meanings can take shape.

This essentially formal conception of *acts* is open to criticism for not taking into account the real conditions in which *acts* take place. As human agents we are dependent on our judgement of when to *act* and liable for the consequences. With student teachers it may sound simplistic to present a conception of *acts* as *assertions* of new discursive space, when such *assertions* may sit uncomfortably alongside the need to fulfil course criteria and gain accreditation. Žižek's work has drawn criticism for perhaps over-valuing invariant structures in the social and psychological fields and neglecting their lived phenomena (Butler et al., 2000, p. 29). Nevertheless, gains in autonomy in student teachers can expose

fault lines between alternative understandings of the purposes of teaching. As has been suggested above, educative *praxis* aiming at self-fulfilment through meeting the needs of learners (*universality*) may sit at odds with meeting the demands of accreditation (*abstraction*). Through participating in activities like the one outlined here, students may be enabled to recognise how such difficulties create tensions in their own thinking, and to generate a stronger sense of themselves as autonomous learners able to tackle these issues.

Introducing events

'Repression' is a central concept in Freud's work (Freud, 1986, pp. 519–533). During psychoanalytic treatment, the analyst constructs psychic defences against the admission of certain repressed truths. However, it is just such signs of truth, betrayed through their defensive psychic structures, for which the analyst looks to direct the treatment. Žižek notes

Resistance ... is itself contaminated by what it tries to repress, so its analysis in working through is not just a process of dismantling the obstacles in order to gain access to truth—here also, *la verité surgit de la meprise*, truth is immanent to the process of covering up ... something that can be uncovered by the immanent analysis of resistance. (Žižek, 2014, p. 76)

In a strange paradox, it is precisely the effort to lead the analyst away from the truth that reveals the truth where it is. In a parallel from the world of education, the true emotional state of a teacher is revealed when they are most trying to conceal it—i.e., in front of a difficult class. Above all, the teacher wants to conceal the effort of concealment. Daniel Cho suggests that facing up to this repressed element involves the creation of 'disturbing' knowledge, or, knowledge that we already have but do not want to own up to (2007). 'Disturbing' knowledge therefore seems to come at us from outside ourselves—that is, from outside the common-sense view of ourselves we may be trying to defend. This combination of acute otherness, and intimate proximity to our innermost selves, characterises Žižek's conception of the *event*.

Žižek's conception echoes Deleuze's account of *events*, contained in *The Logic of Sense*. For example in Žižek's (2014, pp. 99, 100) discussion of signification in the work of Levi Strauss, mirrors a discussion in Deleuze's earlier work, with Žižek's point of 'suture' (2014, pp. 99, 100) between signifier and signified fulfilling a similar function to Deleuze's 'principle of the emission of singularities' (Deleuze, 1990, pp. 58–61). Žižek's *event* contrasts with the now famous conception of Alain Badiou, whereby an *event* comprises an *external* structure, 'something that happens in situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot be accounted for' (Badiou, 2001, p. 41). In contrast, in Žižek's psychoanalytic perspective, *events* arise in what we take to be *immanent* conditions of lived situations, where the situation already contains 'disturbing' knowledge in need of further scrutiny.

University session two: The 'objective' perspective

Students were invited to explore how their professional development was being influenced by expectations of 'common sense' in different (school and university) locations. The stimulus material was an excerpt from Christopher Nolan's movie *Memento*. The protagonist in that movie has acute memory loss, so faces a constant battle to re-orientate himself to shifting surroundings. In opting for this movie, tutors felt that students were likely to feel a resonance with their own, rapidly changing professional circumstances. Like the central character, Leonard, the students were amassing evidence (notes, reflections, records of meetings, lesson observations) that captured aspects of current experience at particular moments, highlighting aspects of continuity, or disjuncture with subsequent events. Despite these precautions, Leonard is continually troubled by the knowledge that he does *not* have. He concentrates on trying to muster a 'common sense' response to the shifting hazards being laid before him.

Students were asked to gather different kinds of data relating to the same occurrence in school, for example, their own reflections on an episode of their teaching, set against feedback from a tutor or mentor. The thinking behind making these comparisons was to draw students' attention to alternative versions of 'common sense' implicit in the data. Like Leonard in *Memento*, students needed to find

ways of working with 'common sense' whilst questioning where it might be leading them in terms of future understanding. For example, a tutor's comments might seem unnecessarily incisive or harsh, whilst drawing attention to technical aspects of classroom delivery hitherto overlooked. Conversely, a student may be troubled by having to be seen to 'perform' in class, and dealing with these emotions might lead them to think more deeply and critically about 'performance culture' in future. Of course, none of these developments is straightforward. Reflecting Žižek's conception of the *event*, students were being asked to look more carefully at ideas about practice in which they were *already* involved, perhaps without full acknowledgement or awareness. They were invited to notice where such insights were troubling or created pressure, and to consider why this might be. Implicit in this work was the assumption that the 'external' or 'objective' world would continue to come back at them and surprise them. Calling to mind Kolakowski's theory of cognition once again, students were being encouraged to look at their own thinking from the 'objective' perspective, from the point-of-view of the world pushing back at their conception of themselves as autonomous learners. In tangling with these various pressures, it was hoped that students would be willing to continually renew their ideas about what the external (material, actual) world was really demanding from them. That is, they would remain sensitive to the (*universal*) needs of learners whilst recognising that their understanding of these needs would continue to change. In responding to these changing needs, students were also refining a sense of their own capacity to *act*—to invest in a renewed conception of themselves as autonomous learners.

Conclusion

This article explored some of the theoretical implications of the author's work with postgraduate student teachers. It was suggested this work can be viewed as a nascent educative *praxis*, in Marx's sense of achieving self-fulfilment through fulfilling the needs of others. However, the categories 'subject' and 'object', 'self' and 'other' are problematic, particularly in an 'other'-oriented field like education, where we work so closely alongside other people. These ideas were explored in detailed reference to university-based activities, intended to encourage students to become more autonomous and other-oriented practitioner-researchers. A theorisation was developed, drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, particularly Žižek's concepts *act* and *event*. It was suggested that 'subject' and 'object' are not fixed categories but alternative orientations in a continuum of meaning. An emergent educative *praxis* (or 'thinking', in the shorthand of this article), would therefore involve remaining open and responsive to the interlay of perspectives. In particular, an educative *praxis* would be exploring its obligation to the requirements of *universality*—presented here as the real needs of learners.

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Notes on contributor

Chris Hanley is senior lecturer in education at Manchester Metropolitan University. His research interests include teacher development, the philosophy of education, citizenship education and pedagogies of literacy.

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